How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?

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How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live? Transformations of a Depression-era Protest Song

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1. Introduction

This case study explores the evolution of "How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live," originally recorded in 1929 by the Virginian composer-singer-fiddler Blind Alfred Reed. Suzy Rotolo (2008, p. 246), commenting on Phil Och's songs, notes that "they were journalistic, restricted to a specified subject or event. To write topical songs is risky because as time passes the songs lose their relevance: they have a built-in expiration date." To the degree that "How Can a Poor Man..." is a topical protest song, one might wonder why this song has survived beyond the Depression Era. The words *evolution* and *survival* are used intentionally since the Darwinian metaphor "the song as an organism" can help us think about how texts (in the broad sense, embracing lyrics, music and performance) change in relation to their environment.[1] What makes this song tick? What textual and musical features have contributed to its success? Why has it remained relevant to new generations despite its link to the Depression era (e.g., a verse about the Prohibition)? How have successive artists manipulated the original version to their own esthetic or political ends, and to what effect? To what degree do these rewritings, new performances and varied musical textures reflect their times and deflect the original message of the song? More generally, how do the functions and meanings of protest songs evolve? How do they adapt to their constantly changing historical and social milieu?

2. Blind Alfred Reed: a conservative protest singer of the Roaring Twenties?

Born on June 15, 1880 in Floyd, Virginia, and raised in a conservative family, Alfred Reed, blind at birth, began performing at an early age. He was first recorded for Victor by Ralph Peer at the famous Bristol sessions on July 28, 1927. On December 19, 1927, he recorded "Why Do You Bob Your Hair?," a reactionary protest song of sorts, which complains about women's hair style fashion of the 1920s.[2] Reed's most successful song, "How Can a Poor Man...", was recorded for Victor in NYC on December 4, 1929, barely six weeks after the October 24 (Black Thursday) stock market crash.

3. The original "How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?"

What are some of the textual, musical and performance features that might explain the success of this song?[3] Reed adopts a populist stance, railing against inflation, schools, taxes, and the conduct of Prohibition as well as lambasting establishment targets such as police officers, preachers and doctors. As Tony Russell (1998) writes in his liner notes

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[1] This diachronic approach, implicit in my study of Woody Guthrie's "Ballad of Tom Joad" (Arleo 2006a), is theorized and discussed in relation to children's oral tradition in Arleo (forthcoming).

[2] This may have been tongue in cheek. Reed's great great grandson noted in a comment posted on May 20, 2005 that Reed's own daughter was a flapper! Source: http://www.archive.org/details/Reed.

[3] See Appendix 1 for the lyrics.

to a CD reissue of Reed's complete works, the singer assails "the whole rackety demonology of the modern world that stank in the nostrils of an upright rural Southerner." The lyrics are grounded in folksy idioms (v. 3: "Just like skinning a flea for the hide") and concrete images (v. 7: "a little wad of paper with gristle and bone"). Reed talks the talk of the common man, as shown by the non-standard grammar (v. 1: "prices nearly *puts* a man to sleep"), the use of the stigmatized contraction "ain't," and the dated colloquial language ("two bits," "a dandy shirt," "a humbug pill"). Illustrating standard populist rhetoric, the first lines of verses 4 and 6 start off with familiar stereotypical statements "the schools we have today ain't worth a cent," "preachers preach for gold and not for souls"), and then spell out the consequences for the poor man in the rest of the verse: "we have a heavy fine to pay," "taxed and schooled and preached to death." Reed also appeals to the listener by embedding short first person narratives about an idealized non-inflationary past, when dry goods were cheap as dirt and flour was fifty cents for a twenty-four pound bag.

To convey the content of the song, which cleverly combines topical detail and more general working-class complaints, Reed uses a simple but effective poetic form that is widespread in popular song. Each verse, made up of two rhyming couplets, ends with a catchy mini-refrain from which the title of the song is derived: "Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live." This memorable verbal and musical hook is retained in the subsequent versions that we will examine. The lyricist recycles the rhetorical question device that proved so successful for his earlier "Why do you bob your hair?" He also draws on the power of alliteration, a hallmark of the English-language oral poetic tradition (e.g. "a dose of dope") as well as subtle internal assonance (e.g., "for gold and not for souls").

In musical terms, the song has a binary 16-bar structure (if transcribed in 2/4 or 2/2 meter) that is widespread in the folk tradition.[4] Lines 1 and 2 each extend over 4 bars while lines 3 and 4 each extend over two bars. The refrain is four bars long. Thus, the lines are roughly distributed as shown below in Figure 1:

Line 1 → bars 1-4
Line 2 → bars 5-8
Line 3 → bars 9-10
Line 4 → bars 11-12
Refrain → bars 13-16

Fig. 1: Distribution of lines over bars.

Reed uses a simple hexatonic almost childlike melody, with a narrow easy-to-sing range (in his version from the G below middle C to the E a major sixth above). The rhythm of the melody is also basic with no syncopation or tricky figures to execute. There are few instances of melisma (i.e. one syllable sung over several notes).

The performance is straightforward with a bare-bones arrangement. After a short fiddle-guitar introduction consisting of the second half of the melody, Reed sings the eight verses with the fiddle doubling the melody. The fiddle states the melody of the

[4] Arleo (2006b) discusses the possible universality of 16-beat children's rhymes.

refrain after verses 2, 4 and 6, and at the end of the song, splitting up the piece into four equal-size chunks. His son Arville provides competent backup on country-style guitar typical of the period, using bass runs and arpeggios to complement his father's vocal and fiddle.[5] The song is played in the fiddle-friendly key of G major (although the instruments appear to be tuned slightly lower, making it sound in between F# and G). As for the vocal, one detects a slight southern accent on the recording, especially in the pronunciation of vowels (e.g. pill/bill), but there does not seem to be any strong assertion of regional identity.

On the surface, "How Can a Poor Man..." looks like a protest song, but we must remember that Reed was also a professional entertainer and some of this might be tongue in cheek, as suggested by Tony Russell. In any event, it is revealing that Reed is not mentioned several standard works on protest songs, such as John Greenway's classic *American Protest Songs* (1953) or Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer's 1973 collection *Songs of Work and Protest*, both of which deal with the left-wing protest tradition embodied by Woody Guthrie. Reed is not mentioned either by Richard & JoAnne Reuss (2000) in their more recent study *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*.

4. The New Lost City Ramblers: reclaiming the marginalized past

Let's fast forward to the end of the 1950s, when few people would have remembered Reed's song, so distant in sound and style from the esthetics of the popular music of the time. By recording "How Can a Poor Man..." on their 1959 Folkways album *Songs of the Depression*, The New Lost City Ramblers provided a vital link in the evolutionary chain of the song. Founded in 1958 by John Cohen, Tom Paley and Mike Seeger (Pete's half-brother), the Rambers introduced early country music to young urban audiences and brought many of the original performers to the concert stage (Cantwell 1997, p. 42). According to Cantwell (ibid., p. 330), their performance style sounded "as exotic as a Tibetan prayer." Nevertheless, their influence on the up-and-coming performers and songwriters of the 1960s was immense. In his *Chronicles*, Bob Dylan (2004, p. 69-70) pens a telling panegyric to his early hero Mike Seeger (who, sadly, died of cancer in August 2009):

> He was extraordinary, gave me an eerie feeling. Mike was unprecedented. He was like a duke, the knight errant. As for being a folk musician, he was the supreme archetype. He could push a stake through Dracula's black heart. He was the romantic, egalitarian and revolutionary type all at once--had chivalry in his blood. Like some figure from a restored monarchy, he had come to purify the church.

In spite of their efforts at restoration, it would be unfair to portray the The Rambers only as slavish purists. Through careful listening they were successful in meticulously recreating the old-timey sound, but were also outstanding musicians who put their own stamp on the material in subtle ways. This can be heard in their reconstruction of "How Can a Poor Man...." Although they retain all eight verses

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[5] Cf. The Carter family recordings or the more intricate bass lines of Riley Pucket, the blind guitarist of the The Skillet Lickers, the good-time hell-raising Georgian string band that was recorded in the 1920s.

recorded by Reed, some of the quirks in the lyrics are ironed out. In the first verse, for instance, "There was once a time" becomes "There once was a time", which is metrically more effective. The epenthetic schwas ("we just a-feel like a-making our will") add rhythmic bounce to their performance. Like Reed, they perform the tune in G major at about the same tempo (roughly 90 beats per minute), but, as a trio, they add a 5-string banjo to the original guitar-fiddle version. The fiddle break is longer, slightly more elaborate and more rhythmically incisive than in Reed's version, which might have been a nod to their contemporary urban folk audience in search of hot licks. The Ramblers were known for their instrumental chops, and served as role models for the many old-time bands that would crop up in the following decades.

Listening to this version, one wonders once again to what extent this is a protest song on a pragmatic level, that is in its intention and its effects on the audience of the period. Wasn't it more a mixture of cultural history, entertainment, and nostalgia, which today might be labeled Americana? Cantwell (ibid., p. 330) notes perceptively that the Ramblers, in spite of their "arcane scholarship" and their 19th century appearance, "were not above self-parody" and they "typically identified themselves to nightclub audiences as an underground version of the Kingston trio." In any case, they were not usually associated with overt political protest, although they were part of the Northeastern urban folk revival scene, which clearly leaned to the left. While Reuss & Reuss (2000) devote many pages to Charles Seeger (Mike's father) and Pete Seeger, they do not mention Mike Seeger or the New Lost City Ramblers at all. On the other hand, the very style of the Ramblers might be construed as a form of cultural protest against much of the bland commercial music of the Eisenhower era, which also turned off young singer songwriters like Bob Dylan and others. By recording songs like “How Can a Poor Man...,” the Ramblers did more that just document the past; they appeared to be reclaiming, in the name of authenticity, a marginalized American traditional music, which would later be called roots music. In this respect they were in tune with the cultural values of Beat Generation writers like Allan Ginsberg (cf. "Howl") and Jack Kerouac who were on the road in a similar quest, even though their models (e.g., Whitman for Ginsberg, Charlie Parker for Kerouac) and approaches differed.

5. Ry Cooder: funkifying tradition

Ry Cooder, our next key character in this story, was also homing in on the marginalized sounds of the past (e.g., Tex-Mex, early jazz and blues, Hawaiian music), which he reshaped creatively thanks to his impressive instrumental chops and his choice of outstanding sidemen steeped in the tradition (like Tex-Mex accordionist Flaco Jimenez). His version of “How Can a Poor Man...” was released on his 1970 debut LP. Unlike the Rambers' version, his cover radically revamps the original. Five of the eight verses are deleted, and the others are reordered as shown below.

Blind Alfred Reed version:	Ry Cooder version:
8th (last) verse	1st verse
1st verse	2nd verse
5th verse	3rd (last) verse

Fig. 2: Verse order of Ry Cooder's version of “How Can a Poor Man...” compared to the original.

Cooder begins his version by targeting the doctor with the humbug pill, moves on to lament the rising prices, and ends with the Prohibition, which had been repealed nearly forty years earlier. Could this have been a subtle allusion to the prohibition on drugs in the Sixties? There are also some small but revealing changes in the lyrics. For example, while the Ramblers kept the non-standard construction "prices nearly *puts* a man to sleep," Cooder uses the standard plural "put." The quant "if 'tis conducted right" is replaced by "if it's conducted right." On the other hand, the effective chorus line is rendered verbatim.

The transformed musical setting no longer evokes the rural south. The song is transposed to Bb major and Cooder enriches the chord progression by adding a Cm chord at the end of the fourth line. The melody has been reshaped and is now based on the major pentatonic scale, so widespread in American folk, gospel and rock traditions as well as other musical cultures around the world. The tempo is slower (roughly 60 beats per minute). The rhythm section, including drums, electric bass, piano, and guitar, provides a heavily syncopated almost polyrhythmic background influenced by African American tradition, a hallmark of Ry Cooder's sound. One can make out an amplified fiddle, perhaps influenced by the Tex-Mex folk tradition, but playing in a very different style from Reed's. Cooder's slide guitar solo stands out, echoing both the blues tradition and Hawaiian slack key steel guitar playing.

It is hard to view Cooder's version of “How Can a Poor Man...” as a contemporary protest song, especially when compared to the work of Phil Ochs, the early Bob Dylan, Buffy Sainte-Marie and many other singer-songwriters of the Sixties. Although it was recorded as the battle outside was raging, with mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War, the radicalization of the black power movement and general tumult in different parts of the world, there are no clear-cut allusions to current events. At best, one might interpret the line "Officers kill without a cause" as a contemporary reference to the riots of the 1960s, but this is a stretch. Although Cooder has embraced progressive causes throughout his career and his recent musical projects have taken a political turn (e.g. the 2007 album *My Name is Buddy*), he is not usually considered as a protest singer. Like the Ramblers, Cooder is viewed primarily as an outstanding revivalist, a creative musician's musician searching out the sounds of the past, at home and abroad, in order to recycle and recombine them for his own musical ends. His consistant brilliant musicianship has no doubt overshadowed his work as a cultural historian, who has sought to highlight the continuity in the progressive songwriting tradition and to celebrate the music of the downtrodden.[6]

The New Lost City Ramblers' version of Reed's “How Can a Poor Man...” displayed subtle small-scale mutations, while Cooder's reworking was much more radical and substantial, shedding verses no longer adapted to the times, which were a-changing, and introducing a funkier more urban sound. But neither performance comes close to capturing the urgency, the rage or the biting satire of the classic protest songs of

[6] It is revealing that in 2009 he performed in a "The People Speak," a documentary feature film based on historian Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*.

the Sixties, such as Dylan's *Masters of War* or *I Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag* by Country Joe and The Fish. Enter Bruce Springsteen.

6. Bruce Springsteen: updating "How Can a Poor Man..."

We come to the last episode (for now) of our saga. Springsteen's manager, Jon Landau had sent him a tape of Ry Cooder's cover. Springsteen liked it musically and felt that "for me there was a place to make it more current."[7] The Springsteen version is also in Bb, includes the C minor chord introduced by Cooder, has a slide guitar solo, and begins with the verse about the doctor and the humbug pill.

The remaining verses, penned by Springsteen, are a creative updating of the song, which refers to hurricane Katrina, its effects on the population and the much-criticized reaction of the federal government and President George W. Bush. This would be obvious to most American listeners, even though there is no direct reference to Katrina.[8] The lyrics are chock full of intertextual nuggets. The second verse begins with a direct quote of George W. Bush. In verse 3, the line "Them who's got got out of town and them who ain't got left to drown" recalls Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child": "Them that's got shall get/Them that's not shall lose." In the fourth verse, "I ain't got no home in this world no more" comes directly from the famous Woody Guthrie song "I ain't got no home in this world anymore," with Springsteen upping the ante in regards to non-standard multiple negation. In the last verse, "Gonna be a judgment that's a fact/A righteous train rollin' down this track" evokes the gospel tradition.

One also notes considerable musical intertextuality. The intro evokes the African-influenced New Orleans drumming tradition, the horns reference jazz, and the backup vocalists remind us of the black gospel and R & B traditions. We are far from Blind Albert Reed's Appalachians. By recycling the lyrics, and introducing such a broad range of textual and musical references, Springsteen provides an inclusive synthesis of different American traditions, black and white, rural and urban. It is significant that the song was included on the American Land Edition of the *We Shall Overcome - The Seeger Sessions* album. Springsteen clearly positions himself within the protest song tradition embodied by Pete Seeger. Unlike the original version, there is not the slightest hint of tongue-in-cheek entertainment here. The emphatic dramatic performance and the bitter irony of the lyrics tell us that this is indeed an angry protest song.

7. Conclusion

What remains of the original song and why has it survived? All these versions (there are others) live on in recorded form and in some human memories, but the Springsteen performance is probably the best known today. This version retains the basic tune, the last of the original verses, and of course the memorable and singable refrain, which may be the key to the song's success. While most of the original verses are gradually becoming extinct, the refrain has been an evolutionary success because it is sufficiently generic and malleable to adapt to new social environments.[9] It remains to be seen

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[7] Source: www.springsteenlyrics.com.

[8] Several years ago I asked a group of French Master students to analyze the lyrics of different versions of "How Can a Poor Man..." for a second session exam and none of them picked up the meaning of the Springsteen cover.

[9] To extend the metaphor, recordings may be viewed as fossils that document past performances

whether Springsteen's new topical lyrics will have a relatively short "shelf life" (Rotolo 2008, p. 246) since they refer to a specific historical event, which may not favor their replication.

Blind Albert Reed's original lyrics remind us that protest songs do not necessarily express a leftist or progressive perspective, as we also know from songs like Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee," which, although probably written tongue in cheek, was generally received as a protest song against protest, a meta-protest song of sorts. Reed brilliantly summed up populist themes ("the schools ain't worth a cent," "taxed to death") that are often recycled by the right for their own purposes. Whatever Reed's intentions, Springsteen subverts the original song, turning it into an effective topical left-wing protest song and an anti-Bush vehicle.[10]

Finally, this evolutionary tale of "How Can a Poor Man..." teaches a more general lesson. Like any other genre, the protest song is a fuzzy category with so-called prototype effects.[11] Just as an apple is a good example of the perceptual category "fruit," some songs, (e.g., Buffy Sainte-Marie's "Universal Soldier") exemplify the category "protest song" better than others, which are more peripheral. In determining the degree of "protest-song-likeness," the logocentric listener may place a premium on the semantic dimension, i.e. the lyrics. This paper has argued that the pragmatic dimension (including the cultural, historical and social context; the musical texture; the performance dynamics) also contributes strongly to our perception of a song.

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10 This was, in a sense, sweet revenge since Springsteen's "Born in the USA" was notoriously hijacked as a patriotic anthem by conservative Republicans during the 1984 presidential campaign.

11 Prototype theory was introduced by cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch following a series of ingenious experiments. Put simply, it states that certain members of a category are perceived as "best examples" (e.g., a robin is a very good example of a bird, more so than an ostrich, based on reaction times, rating scales, and so on). Lakoff (1987) provides a reader-friendly discussion of her research on categorization.

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Appendix 1: Lyrics of three versions of How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live

HOW CAN A POOR MAN STAND SUCH TIMES AND LIVE ?
(Blind Alfred Reed, recorded for Victor in New York, NY, December 4, 1929)

(*8-bar fiddle and guitar intro*.)

There was once a time when everything was cheap,
But now prices almost puts a man to sleep.
When we pay our grocery bill,
We just feel like making our will.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?

I remember when dry goods were cheap as dirt,
We could take two bits and buy a dandy shirt.
Now we pay three bucks or more,
Maybe get a shirt that another man wore.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?
(fiddle repeats chorus)

Well, I used to trade with a man by the name of Gray,
Flour was fifty cents for a twenty-four pound bag.
Now it's a dollar and a half beside,
Just like skinning a flea for the hide.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?

Oh, the schools we have today ain't worth a cent,
But they see to it that every child is sent.
If we don't send everyday,
We have a heavy fine to pay.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?
(fiddle repeats chorus)

Prohibition's good if 'tis conducted right,
There's no sense in shooting a man 'til he shows flight.
Officers kill without a cause,
Then complain about funny laws.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?

Most all preachers preach for gold and not for souls,
That's what keeps a poor man always in a hole.
We can hardly get our breath,
Taxed and schooled and preached to death.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?
(fiddle repeats chorus)

Oh, it's time for every man to be awake,
We pay fifty cents a pound when we ask for steak.

When we get our package home,
Got a little wad of paper with the gristle and bone.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?

Well the doctor comes around with a face so bright,
And he says in a little while you'll be all right.
All he gives is a humbug pill,
A dose of dope and a great big bill.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?
(fiddle repeats chorus)

HOW CAN A POOR MAN STAND SUCH TIMES AND LIVE ?

(as sung by Ry Cooder on *Ry Cooder*, Reprise, 1970)

Well, the doctor comes around with his face all bright,
And he says, "In a little while you'll be all right!"
All he gives is a humbug pill,
Dose of dope and a great big bill.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?

Well there once was a time when everything was cheap
But now prices nearly put a man to sleep.
Well, we get our grocery bill
We just feel like making our will.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?

(slide guitar solo)

Prohibition's good if it's conducted right,
There's no sense in shooting a man 'til he shows flight.
Officers kill without a cause,
Then they complain about the funny laws.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live?

(slide guitar solo and fade-out)

HOW CAN A POOR MAN STAND SUCH TIMES AND LIVE?

(as sung by Bruce Springsteen on *We Shall Overcome : The Seeger Sessions American Land Edition*, 2006)

(drums intro.)

Well the doctor comes 'round here with his face all bright
And he says "In a little while you'll be alright."
All he gives is a humbug pill,
A dose of dope and a great big bill.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live

"Me and my old school pals had some mighty high times down here
And what happened to you poor black folks, well it just ain't fair."
He took a look around, gave a little pep talk,
Said "I'm with you" then he took a little walk.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live

There's bodies floatin' on Canal and the levees gone to Hell,
Martha, get me my sixteen gauge and some dry shells.
Them who's got got out of town,
And them who ain't got left to drown.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live

Go ahead! (*spoken*) (slide guitar solo + horns)

Got friends scattered from Texas all the way to Baltimore
Yeah and I ain't got no home in this world no more.
Gonna be a judgment that's a fact,
A righteous train rollin' down this track.
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live
Tell me how can a poor man stand such times and live